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ABSTRACT

Immigration and the role of English are issues very much on the minds of Americans. "English-only" laws in California and elsewhere have ironically not included provision for funding English-language instruction. Nationwide, the demand for classes far exceeds the supply. A survey shows that 37 percent of illiterate adults do not speak English at home and that up to 86 percent of non-English speakers who are illiterate in English are also illiterate in their native languages. Furthermore, the limited English speaking segment of the population is growing in size and in importance. Up to one-third of those added to the ranks of limited-English speakers every year are not new immigrants, but the products of U.S. schools. Usually, literacy is thought of as the reading and writing skills required by persons who already speak English, indeed, many English speakers use the spoken language alone to "get by". English as a Second Language (ESL) experts consider the development of listening and speaking skills a prerequisite for learning to read and write for limited English speakers who do not know how to listen to, comprehend, and utter the spoken language. Major funding and service paths include the Adult Basic Education Program, Refugee Assistance Agencies, the Department of State, vocational education programs, voluntary organizations and libraries, community-based organizations, migrant programs, and business and industry. Given the scale of the problem, the major funding responsibility must reside in the public sector. (YLB)

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BCEL BUSINESS COUNCIL FOR EFFECTIVE LITERACY

ADULT LITERACY : PROGRAMS • PLANNING • ISSUES

A Newsletter For The Business Community

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LITERACY IN A NEW LANGUAGE

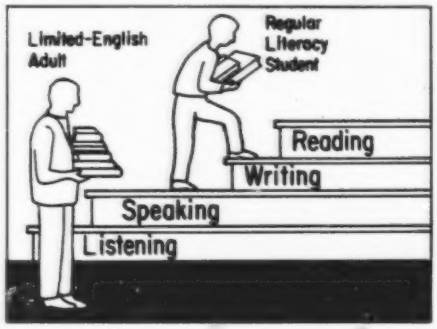
In the months since the rekindling of the Statue of Liberty's torch, a landmark immigration bill has been signed into law, a movement to declare English the official national language has won a major electoral victory in California, and tens of thousands of adults who can't speak English have been turned away from overfilled classes throughout the country.

Immigration and the role of English are issues very much on the minds of Americans as 1987 begins, and they promise to increase in prominence and urgency as demographic forces dramatically alter the population and the economy in the coming years.

The new immigration law offers legal status or amnesty to aliens who can prove they entered the U.S. before 1982. The Immigration and Naturalization Service estimates that up to 2.6 million of the 6 million or so illegal immigrants residing in the country will be eligible. The law also provides penalties for employers who knowingly hire illegal aliens in the future. Many believe this feature will help the country regain control of its borders by reducing work opportunities for illegals (while others point to the need for the cheap labor of illegals who fill jobs scorned by Americans). Some experts question, however, whether this will happen, claiming that the new law will actually increase the flow of legal immigration as millions of relatives are permitted to join their newly-legalized family members.

English-Only Laws

In November, California voters by a 3-to-1 margin approved a constitutional amendment declaring English the official state language. Few would argue that the U.S. should remain an English-speaking nation, but the law's opponents fear that newcomers without language skills might be denied essential support from public assistance services due to the lack of bilingual personnel. The tone of last year's campaign for the amendment has also caused concern, with some observers suggesting that the campaign was not pro-English as much as anti-immigrant, which they equate with nativist movements decrying the waves of Germans, Irish, Italians, Jews, and others who came earlier to our shores.



Ironically, "English-Only" laws in California and elsewhere have not included provision for funding English-language instruction. Nationwide, the demand for classes far exceeds the supply. Education officials in Los Angeles estimate, for example, that up to 40,000 adults will be turned away from classes this year. In New York City, about 6,000 are on wait-lists for English classes, and substantially larger numbers may have been "lost" because most providing groups don't bother or aren't able to maintain wait-lists. This state of affairs exists, according to Marian Schwartz, the Mayor's Coordinator for Youth Services, despite the fact that "the system has tripled its capacity in the past three years."

Recent reports further illustrate the scale of the problem. A survey released recently by the U.S. Department of Education has found that 37 percent of adults classified as illiterate don't speak English at home. Of those, 82 percent were born outside the U.S., 21 percent entered the country within the past six years, and some 42 percent are living in neighborhoods in which a language other than English is predominant. The most staggering finding is that up to 86 percent of the non-English speakers who are illiterate in English are also illiterate in their native language. Another study, by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, reveals dramatically lower literacy levels among minorities and half of those whose literacy skills were too limited for the study's simulation tasks were young adults unable to speak English.

That attention is focusing more and more on the circumstances of limited-English speakers is timely because this segment of the population is growing rapidly in size and importance. Up to one million persons, including undocumented entrants and refugees, are entering the country every year. Legal immigrants come primarily from Asia, Mexico, Central and South America, and the Carribean, and a full 75 percent of undocumented entrants are from Mexico (50 percent) and Central and South America.

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This population is having a significantly beneficial effect as a youthful infusion into our aging labor force. The baby-boom generation, which married later and waited longer to start families, has created a current shortage of young people needed to fill jobs. "Through the year 1994 we will see diminishing numbers of [indigenous] young people ages 16 to 24 entering the labor force. It will be the year 2000 before we begin to see an increase," says Ronald Kutscher, Associate Commmisioner of the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics. "We are seeing several responses to this phenomenon. Businesses are recruiting older workers, they are seeking to employ handicapped individuals, they are raising wages, and they are recruiting immigrants."

New Immigrants/New Minorities, a recent report by the American Council on Life Insurance warns: "For the newest immigrants, labor force participation rates will be higher than those for the population as a whole. Most of these immigrants come to America in their early twenties and thirties and immediately look for work. [Lack of] adequate training in job techniques as well as the English language may pose problems for the employers of tomorrow. Communication difficulties may arise, particularly if no serious attempt is made to integrate these immigrants into the mainstream of American society." Indeed, BCEL contacts in the business community indicate that health, food, and other service industries already depend heavily on this population and are faced now with having to address their communications and basic skills needs. And it must be kept in mind that young minorities will be making up an increasingly larger part of the entry-level workforce in the years to come.

Population Profile

According to the 1980 Census, about 64 percent of the multi-cultural mosaic making up the nation's limited-English population speaks Spanish at home. One of four Hispanics report speaking English poorly or not at all. The National Commission for Employment Policy estimates that nearly half of those aged 14-21 who live in Spanish-speaking households have limited English proficiency. And using Adult Performance Level criteria, 56 percent of Hispanics over 18 would be classified as functionally illiterate.

The Hispanic communities across the nation are very diverse:

- **Mexican Americans**, located mainly in California and Texas, may be recent arrivals or descendants of families dating back generations. Demographers predict that Mexican immigration to the U.S. will increase, the new immigration law notwithstanding, due to the weak economy there and the low-skill jobs available in this country.
- **Puerto Ricans**, living primarily in New York and New Jersey, may be recent arrivals from the island, mainland-born, or workers who migrate between island and mainland. Half of all mainland Puerto Ricans have annual incomes less than $10,000, and half of those below $5,000.
- **Marielitos**, unlike the predominantly successful business and professional Cuban Americans who arrived in the early sixties, arrived in the 1980 boatlift and have faced a more difficult resettlement.
- **Central Americans** flow into the U.S. primarily from villages in rural Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador. They have little previous exposure to life in an urban setting, little or no educational background, and often cannot read or write in Spanish. Their resettlement problems are compounded by their illegal status here, putting critical health and social services beyond reach.

English Class for U.S.-bound Southeast Asians at Philippine Refugee Center

Asians are the other major limited-English group. Those who arrived in 1985 as a result of changes in immigration policy at the time were largely Chinese, Korean, and Japanese from urban settings. As a group they have distinguished themselves in education, business, and the professions. The 800,000 refugees who have arrived since 1975 (from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia) face a much tougher resettlement. They are mostly rural villagers, with problems similar to those of the Central Americans. (Southeast Asian men arrive here with an average of six and half years of education; the women have less than four.)

Other newcomer groups (25 percent of the total) include Haitians, Afghans, Ethiopians, and East Europeans, each with its own special problems.

A Note on Schools & Schooling

It should be noted that up to one-third of those added to the ranks of limited-English speakers every year are not newcomers to our shores, but the products of our schools. Hispanic dropout rates are known to be especially high, ranging between 50 percent and 80 percent in the nation's largest cities. High school reforms come too late for these young people, as they are often over-age for their grade level and drop out before reaching high school. In fact, predictions are that the stricter promotion and graduation requirements at the core of high school reform are likely to result in greater rates of failure and even lower self-esteem for these minority students because of low funding for remedial education and a shortage of bilingual faculty to fill even the currently-funded positions.

Survival Issues

Newly-arrived refugees in particular face numerous practical survival problems–obtaining housing and clothing...figuring out how to use public transportation, community services, and supermarkets...enrolling children in school. On top of these social adjustment stresses, many suffer severe psychological distress stemming from their lives back home or the circumstances of their departure. They have fled hostilities in their towns and villages, suffered and sometimes witnessed the loss of family members and friends, and been beaten and raped on escape routes by sea, desert, or wilderness. They arrive in this land and culture bereft of the support of family, community, and their own culture's practices for dealing with stress, and they need significant mental health assistance.

For all the adversities, refugee and other immigrant groups have one advantage over indigenous limited-English speakers who are members of established minority groups. According to BCEL Advisor William Bliss, an expert in language education: "Refugees often prove to be exceptionally resilient. While the pain they have endured may remain with them for years, they often come to sense that arrival here represents a new beginning, an opportunity to rebuild their lives. They were most often members of the majority culture in their country of origin, and haven't been subject to the American minority experience. They haven't inherited a legacy of discrimination, urban decay, and welfare dependency. So their expectations and motivation are high, and the American dream is alive for them." The point is that it is as tough, maybe tougher, to address the skills, survival, and employment needs of the nation's long-established minority language communities as it is these same needs among the new arrivals.

Communication and Culture: A Two-Way Problem

Usually literacy is thought of as the reading and writing skills required by persons who already speak English. Indeed, many English-speakers "get by" without these basic skills by using spoken language or the help of friends, co-workers, and family members.

Limited-English speakers can't get by in this way, however, because they don't know how to listen, comprehend, and utter the spoken language. Thus, *ESL experts consider the development of speaking and listening skills to be a prerequisite for learning to read and write*. The purpose of these "pre-literacy" skills is to enable the newcomers to manage the immediate tasks of everyday life–banking, shopping, talking on the phone. But the limited-English speaker also needs communication skills for the workplace, even in the most basic entry-level jobs. Though workers frequently learn routine tasks by watching demonstrations of co-workers, the reality is that routines are interrupted, new assignments are given, and equipment breaks down. Workers need to be able to inform supervisors about problems, and supervisors need to be understood when they give instructions and make requests.

Carol Svendsen of Metropolitan State College in Denver observes that: "It is not enough for workers to listen mutely and follow orders. They have to verify their understanding of what they need to do before making serious mistakes. They have to ask questions about specific parts of instructions. When something happens they were not prepared for by their training, they have to indicate the nature of the problem. And they have to do all this in a polite way in order to stay on good terms with the supervisor or co-worker."

Staying on good terms brings the "cultural" aspect of literacy into play--that is, newcomers must know what behavior is appropriate and expected. American expectations regarding punctuality, dress, hygiene, and other such matters are often quite different from those of other cultures. Thus, employers are baffled when immigrant employees fail to call in sick, resist taking orders from women or younger people, ask questions about the price of clothing or other items, and produce pungent odors in company microwaves at lunch hour.

Literacy 85 in Minnesota found in a recent survey of Indochinese employees that their most common problem was an inability to understand instructions and procedures, often leading to costly mistakes or injuries. Unable to communicate the real difficulty, or to discuss a personality conflict or salary issue, they prefer to avoid conflict and even resign instead of risking confrontation or appearing dumb. Many feel that small talk on the job is irresponsible and that one should work diligently and silently. For their part, employers reported that their Indochinese employees often seemed standoffish or uncommunicative.

In short, employer and employee alike have a tremendous need for greater cultural awareness. Moreover, the new-language employees face a special hurdle in acquiring the basic skills of reading and writing, because they must first acquire listening and oral communications competence. Similarly, employers and others who seek to prepare these people to function in the workplace and in their everyday lives face a special challenge.

Major Funding & Service Paths

The Adult Basic Education Program. The largest effort to provide ESL instruction is the federal/state ABE program. ABE serves about 850,000 limited-English speakers annually (about one-third of the total enrollment). Federal and state expenditures for ABE's ESL instruction are about $34 million annually, not including significant additional state and local funding not centrally tallied. Instruction takes place primarily through programs operated by the public schools and community colleges. Courses almost exclusively offer a "General ESL" basic grammar and vocabulary curriculum or a "Survival ESL" life-skills curriculum. The classes usually are free-standing, with no support services available.

Refugee Assistance Agencies. These programs provide a fuller range of instructional and support services to adults with official refugee status who have arrived within the past 36 months. (Most new arrivals, especially those from Mexico and Central America, are therefore not eligible.) The Office of Refugee Resettlement of the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services estimates that its programs will have a national ESL enrollment of 19,500 students in FY87, at an estimated cost of $16.5 million. A variety of community service agencies, education entities, and refugee self-help groups (known as Mutual Assistance Associations or MAA's) actually provide the instruction and related services. "Survival ESL" classes use a competency-based curriculum that designates life-skill performance objectives. Vocational English classes include language training for general employment or occupation-specific English for a particular job or cluster of jobs. An array of support services is available in some cases, including job counseling, training, and placement. Programs operated by social service agencies may also offer family counseling, child care, and education in health and nutrition.

Department of State. The U.S. Department of State operates intensive English, cultural, and work-orientation programs for Southeast Asian refugees at camps in the Philippines and Thailand. Short orientation programs also are offered for Eastern European refugees at training sites in Austria, Italy, and Germany, and for refugees from countries in Southern Africa at a training site in Botswana. About 36,000 students received instruction in these places in FY86 at a cost of $18 million. The programs for Southeast Asians are indeed intensive: students participate in 500 hours of instruction over a 20-week period, an effective use of their time as they await resettlement in the U.S. The focus is on teaching English in the context of specific tasks that the new entrants will have to perform in their daily lives, and on developing general employment communications skills. These activities are reinforced with native language instruction about American culture and the American workplace. The teachers are English-speaking Filipino and Thai nationals, with Americans serving as supervisors, trainers, and curriculum developers.

Vocational Education Program. Funds from this program also provide services to limited-English speakers, but to a very limited degree because this is not a mandated target group. A few innovative federal Bilingual Vocational Training programs combine vocational ESL training with job-skills training, beginning with the students' language and using increasing amounts of English as proficiency is acquired. The states allocate varying amounts of their vocational education funding for programs for limited-English speakers, with job counseling, placement, and follow-up services often provided.

JTPA. Through the Job Training Partnership Act, a multi-billion dollar enterprise, instruction is given to about 22,000 limited-English speakers annually in a range of local skills-training programs. Unfortunately, this is not a designated target group and, in general, the low-skills level of these people makes it difficult for programs to enroll them and still meet JTPA-mandated job-placement requirements.

Voluntary Organizations & Libraries. The voluntary literacy organizations devote a considerable part of their resources to ESL instruction. Literacy Volunteers of America served nearly 6,000 limited-English speakers last year, 30 percent of their enrollment. Laubach Literacy Action reports that 24,100 students are presently enrolled in ESL, 36 percent of their enrollment. Library programs, often affiliated with LVA and Laubach, provide additional instruction, though their focus is on the English-speaking population. New funding from Title VI of the Library Services and Construction Act is enabling many library systems to strengthen their role in ESL by adding language-learning texts and native-language reading materials to their collections.

Community-Based Organizations. An especially important source of ESL help are the community-based organizations (see BCEL's April 1986 Newsletter). The sources of funding for CBO's range from individual and corporate contributions to foundations, churches, and United Way agencies. Unfortunately, only limited state and local funding is available, and federal ABE funds are generally not distributed to CBO's. Nevertheless, these groups, which take many forms and operate in many different community settings, are uniquely positioned to attract the neediest students who would not seek help elsewhere, and because they are so strongly oriented to individual and community needs they have a substantially lower dropout rate than other kinds of programs.

Penal Institutions. The nation's prisons are another source of ESL instruction, with funding provided by correctional education institutions, the ABE program, and various state sources. But the service is extremely limited, not only in ESL but in the provision of basic skills generally. (See BCEL's October 1986 Newsletter.)

Migrant Programs. JTPA and the Migrant Education program are the main sources of support for ESL instruction for migrant workers, but together they provide only very limited service and funding.

Business & Industry. A final venue for ESL instruction are the programs of business and industry. Some companies provide beginning English to their entry-level employees. Others offer more advanced English training to employees in need of new skills or in line for promotion. Instruction is usually contracted to a local educational provider, though in a few cases an in-house training capability is developed. Programs generally run for an hour, two to five times a week, often on partial or full released time from work. However, experts indicate that, while a company may have several local training programs, they are usually not coordinated, resulting in duplication in the development of models and teaching materials.

Program Models

The organizations and groups that provide ESL instruction are as diverse as the adults they serve. Here is a sampling, with a focus on collaborations between public institutions and the private sector:

- The City University of New York operates ESL programs at 12 locations. "Students attend right on campus, which for an adult is a dignifying experience," says Regina Peruggi, Associate Dean. "Adults can be very sensitive about having to attend very basic courses, but for all anybody knows, they could be on their way to physics class." CUNY has developed an "access continuum" that enables students to move from ESL and literacy instruction to high-school-equivalency preparation and then into college classes. Campus libraries, recreational facilities, learning labs, and other resources are available to the ESL students. Three locations offer classes in Spanish and Haitian Creole as a bridge to ESL.
- In Orlando, the Orange County public schools operate a "Job Site" Project," giving ESL instruction to groups of 15 or more employees during release time. Curriculum writers assess employers' training priorities, technical language, key information in handbooks and manuals, and safety procedures, and they also identify cross-cultural needs. At one site, the Buena Vista Palace Hotel, housekeeping, laundry, and food and beverage workers attend classes in the employee cafeteria five days a week, even on their days off. Teacher Sheila Smith at Daniels Manufacturing says that "management was so impressed with the employees' motivation to learn English that many supervisors asked to study Spanish." A project curriculum writer on the Job-Site Project staff points out: "It's a no-lose situation. The school system reaches students it's committed to serving, the employers obtain essential training services, and the employees receive instruction that can make a difference in their jobs and their lives. Everybody wins."
- In Boston, companies such as Digital, Data-General, and Blue Cross/Blue Shield contract with the Continuing Education Institute for employee ESL classes. "The students often already know the job-specific technical language. What they need is the

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general communication ability," says CEI director Lloyd David. Thus, a key goal is to tie ESL instruction to further education opportunity. David notes that: "ESL is not a motivator in itself for people who have been in the same job for ten years. The motivator is the opportunity to achieve something more, such as the high school degree." Many employees continue in the job-site classes and ultimately earn their diplomas.

• At the Chinatown Resources Development Center in San Francisco, students spend six weeks in intensive ESL and then move into a program of bilingual vocational education in which their time is divided between study and serving as interns in an area company. "There's only so much you can teach them in the classroom," says Lynn Hung, education director. "The classroom can't really simulate the workplace, so we let them continue their training in the work environment." Two hundred companies are involved in the program. An advisory committee of employers meets monthly to review curricula. Hung adds that: "Skills are always being updated; job requirements are constantly changing these days. If you don't keep up with the employers, you wind up training students in the wrong skills." Sixty percent of the students stay on as employees after ther internships end.

• The Center for Employment Training in San Jose combines vocational ESL and occupational training with life-skills in parenting, stress management, and consumer education. The program is an excellent model of cooperation and partnership: social work students at San Jose State provide counseling services, students from U.C. Berkeley and Santa Clara serve as tutors, libraries are sites for supplemental literacy instruction, local companies donate most of the equipment needed and over 100 business and industry representatives serve on an Industrial Advisory Board. "Through the Board, we can adapt quickly to rapid changes in the local company," explains project director Carmen Placido. "For example, we are now closing our electronics classes and expanding word-processing, data-entry, and computerized accounting." Companies often loan a staff member so that students can be custom-trained for the language and skills required for a particular job.

Class at Center for Employment Training, San Jose

• Other notable company efforts include AEtna Life and Casualty's tutorial program, in which employees desiring ESL instruction are tutored by fellow employees who are themselves trained by Hartford's LVA affiliate. At Polaroid, language and cross-cultural training is offered to help limited-English employees adjust to a structural reorganization which requires workers to interact intensively in newly-formed teams. The Southland Corporation is piloting ESL classes for employees in their 7-Eleven convenience stores in Dallas, Coral Gables, and other locations, and plans to expand the effort to help entry-level employees improve their English and prepare for promotion to customer-contact positions.

• Innovative uses of the media to teach English and provide essential information include: Philadelphia's English-by-Radio broadcasts; Arlington's cable TV programs which offer native-language information about shopping, health services, and other community resources; and the Center for Applied Linguistic's instructional videotapes to foster entry-level workplace communications.

Looking Ahead: The Public Sector

Wait-lists continue to build around the country. Even worse, thousands of help-seekers, having shown great courage by just asking for help, are not being recorded at all. At the same time, inadequate funding for instructional programs for limited-English speakers stands as the major obstacle to developing new programs and services, and even for purchasing textbooks and supplies. Moreover, 80 percent of ESL instructors work on a part-time, hourly basis with no job security. The result is higher turnover and little opportunity for professional growth. In addition, the few funds available for research and development in this area are scattered to local projects lacking coordination or the capacity for dissemination.

Drawing on a 1982 study by the Northwest Regional Lab in Portland, Oregon, William Bliss estimates that "a meaningful public commitment to teach English would provide, on average, about 600 instructional hours per student (a minimum for effective instruction), at an average per-student cost of about $1,500. The training of one million new arrivals each year would therefore cost in the neighborhood of $1.5 billion annually, and a five-year English Language Initiative to instruct those already residing here would cost another $1.4 billion a year." He properly points out that these funds should be available to the full range of institutions discussed above, especially CBO's. Given the scale of the problem, the major funding responsibility clearly must reside in the public sector, with local, state, and federal governments sharing the load. Along with other experts in the adult literacy field, Bliss also stresses the need for a national center having an information, technical assistance, and research capacity. Programs have an urgent need for tools and guidance in almost every aspect of their operations, and this need can best be met at the federal level.

In addition to the need for new funding and legislation, it seems imperative to look for ways to get more out of existing government programs for the limited-English population–regardless of whose jurisdiction the programs are under. JTPA and the Vocational Education Program, both of which are generously funded, are two obvious candidates for review but there are many others as suggested above.

In developing a higher level of service for the diverse clientele under discussion in this article, it should be kept in mind that the transfer of illiteracy from parents to children is an important aspect of the problem. Thus, a key goal in current and future efforts must be to further develop family literacy programs. Dropout recovery efforts to bring students back to school or into alternative community programs should also be given higher priority. Indeed, in the schools themselves, special efforts are needed to assure that new-language children or children from limited-English homes are able to meet grade level requirements in basic subjects.

A Key Role For Business

The business community has a critical and growing stake in this problem area. Businesses are already alarmed and involved judging from the increasing range and number that are contacting BCEL. The heavy dependence of the health care, food, and other service industries has already been noted, but other kinds of businesses are also affected in varying degree, and they, too, are beginning to give and ask for help.

Certainly, businesses have an immediate practical need to address the communications and basic skills needs of their current employees, and many will have no choice but to allocate increasing sums to programs for them. But it is also to be hoped that they will see wisdom in taking a larger view of the problem, and join with the public sector in meeting the needs of the limited-English groups beyond their own doors in the community–by giving grants, donating equipment and professional services, adopting a literacy program or school around the corner, and providing other forms of assistance. They should do this not just because many of these persons are their future employees, but because enabling the limited-English residents of their communities to participate in the economic, social, and political benefits of society will pay off in the long run.

A Final Note

Though reliable figures are not available for estimating the precise growth rate of the entire limited-English population over the coming decades, nearly everyone predicts that it will grow dramatically as a percentage of the population. A Population Reference Bureau study of Hispanics and Asians, the two largest new-entrant groups, supports this prediction. According to the Bureau, Hispanics and Asians comprised 7.9 percent of the total U.S. population in 1980. This will climb to 12.3 percent by the year 2000 and 18.1 percent by 2030.